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# INNATE IDEAS AND IMMORTALITY IN DESCARTES AND LOCKE

John Shand

In this paper I shall trace out the connections between the assertion or denial of innate ideas, and the possibility of the soul being immortal. Who, on their own theory of the mind, between Descartes and Locke<sup>1</sup>, is in the best condition to survive death, and indeed exist immortally? For although Descartes and Locke disagree about innate ideas and the nature of the soul, they agree that the soul is immortal. But are both sorts of soul equally fitted to survive? Which of them finds it easier to support the contention that the soul is immortal?

The working definitions here are as follows. By 'innate ideas' I shall mean simple mental concepts not derived from experience, which thus may be the content or material of thoughts singly or combined. By 'immortality' I shall mean the eternal existence of the soul, including of course survival after death of the person; that is, the everlasting existence of the essence of what it is to be an individual human being. By 'soul' I mean the chief essence of man, and by 'a soul' I mean the essence of an individual human being or self. The 'mind' is the whole of the soul that thinks. From this it follows straightaway that in order for an individual mind or self to survive death, that person's soul must continue after death as it did before death in such a way that identity is preserved.

There would seem to be a pretty obvious connection between the view one takes on the ontological nature of the soul and the strength of the contention that one may survive death and more generally exist immortally. There were those who criticised Locke for jeopardising the immortality of the soul by allowing that it is possible that matter may think. A less obvious connection, but just as important, is that between immortality and the view one takes on innate ideas.

I should make it clear that there are certain matters I shall not be concerned with in this essay, but nor are they required as part of my argument. I shall not attempt to justify any particular doctrine about the nature of mind, or deal with the problem of the interaction of mind and body, or scrutinise the logical status of innate ideas themselves. Rather the aim will be to draw out certain implications of taking up various views on these matters as they appear in Descartes and Locke. The emphasis here is on philosophical matters rather than precise scholarly exegesis, although I think my view is accurate with regard to Descartes and Locke.

As is well known, Descartes arrives in *Meditation* II at the view that he is essentially a thinking thing; that he is essentially immaterial (incorporeal). Whether he is entitled to this conclusion is not a major concern here, although one obvious objection, which may be thought relevant later in the discussion, has been that it does not follow from the premise that 'I necessarily exist whenever I think', that 'I am necessarily only a thing that thinks'. We might accept that 'I think' entails 'I exist', without agreeing that 'I exist' entails 'I think'; I may exist in some other way when I do not think; therefore I might not be essentially a thinking thing. There is indeed some doubt as to how much weight Descartes puts on this argument as his attitude seems to differ between the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. Whatever we may think

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Descartes are to John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (eds and tr.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), abbreviated as PWD. All references to Locke are to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Peter Niddich (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), abbreviated as EHU.

of this, Descartes is committed to the view that he is essentially a thinking thing, and that thought is his *only* essential property. Descartes of course presents more than one argument for this view.<sup>2</sup> By 'essence' here we may take it that Descartes means some property *f*, such that if *f* is an essential property of *X*, then *X* cannot exist without possessing property *f*; *f* is at least a necessary condition for the existence of *X*. It may not, of course, be a sufficient condition for the existence of *X*; indeed for Descartes, as for the other rationalists, only God contains in His essence both the necessary and sufficient conditions for existence. In this way Descartes draws the distinction, to be criticised by Spinoza, between true substances and created substances.

However, although the essence of a thing is not a sufficient condition *that* a thing is, for its existence - except in the case of God - the essence of a thing is a necessary and sufficient condition for *what* a thing is, for its being the kind of thing it is. The soul is a necessary and sufficient condition for a human being, without which a human being would cease to exist and with which, if it exists, it continues to exist as a human being. It follows from this that a human being survives death, and indeed is immortal, if and only if the soul survives death. The question then is what it *means* to say a soul survives death. What, more generally, does individual immortal existence consist in?

Locke allows uncertainty as to the nature of the soul.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that it is strictly speaking beyond our capacity to *know* the true nature of the soul; but we may assure ourselves sufficiently to hold the probable belief that the soul is immaterial. This follows from the particular application of the general principle that it is simply beyond our capacity to know the real essence of things. Locke sees no logical contradiction in the notion that matter could think. God is just as capable, if He so chose, to annex thought to matter as to anything else. Descartes in fact does not try to show that matter (whose essential attribute is extension) cannot think so that matter thinking would somehow involve a contradiction; rather his aim is to show that thought may and does exist in separation from matter.

Objections appeared to Locke's suggestion that there could be a material soul and to his view that it was not certain that we have an immaterial soul. Any doubt in this manner seemed plainly to threaten the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Locke rebuts this suggestion<sup>4</sup> by arguing that even if our soul is material and therefore subject to physical dissolution at death, God is quite capable of restoring us to consciousness in a non-physical form if He so wills. The question of the soul's immateriality or otherwise should thus cease to be a pressing concern even for the pious, indeed perhaps especially for the pious. What is important for Locke is to give an account of what it means for the same consciousness to continue regardless of what substantial base is involved.<sup>5</sup> This still implies that Locke's account of the potential substantial base has to be internally logically coherent even if he is unspecific about which base, material or immaterial, carries the continuation of the same personal consciousness.

The *Meditations* is often seen as having two, some may say Janus-arranged, purposes: the stated purpose and the real purpose.<sup>6</sup> The stated purpose includes proofs of the existence of God and vindication of the belief in the immortality of the soul. As if Descartes could not express it so openly, there is the underlying purpose of refuting

<sup>2</sup> PWD vol 2 *Meditations* pp. 53-54, 59-60; PWD vol 2 *Objections and Replies* pp. 93-96, pp. 154-162.

<sup>3</sup> EHU II. ii. 9-25; IV. iii. 6; IV. iv. 15.

<sup>4</sup> EHU IV. iii. 6.

<sup>5</sup> EHU II. xxvii.

<sup>6</sup> PWD vol 2 *Meditations* pp. 3-6.

scepticism in such a way as to underpin mathematical physics. Descartes relies in this latter project on demonstrating the existence of innate ideas and a matter-independent and sense-independent self or soul, thereby opening up the possibility of an objective perspective to our understanding of the world. Descartes requires the establishment of innate ideas in order to ground the objectivity of science, which otherwise would be tied to the contingency of our sensory perspective. This in fact puts the immortality of the soul under risk because the soul's essence is thought. This is the starting point of an interesting, I believe, interplay of issues as between Descartes and Locke.

Locke raises the point, as did Descartes' objectors,<sup>7</sup> that the soul does not always think, for example when asleep, or knocked out, or in the womb<sup>8</sup>. This seems to entail a curiously intermittent existence for the soul. But more dangerously it threatens the immortality of the soul. By 'immortality' here is meant existence of the self outside the usual span of life. It is fair to say that such an immortal existence is for eternity. Since Descartes is committed to the view that the essence of the soul is thought, if we are not thinking we do not exist. Descartes has to explain what is happening in the apparent gaps in our thinking in such a way that he may hold that the soul does not come and go out of existence and that it is indeed immortal. At this point Descartes<sup>9</sup> is driven to introduce the *ad hoc* hypothesis of forgetting. In those times when we appear not to have been thinking we really were thinking, and at that time we were conscious of our thinking, but we have forgotten now that we were thinking then. Moreover, Descartes requires the doctrine of innate ideas in order to support the view that the soul is capable of thought before being united with the body through which it may gather the ideas of sensory experience. Without any ideas as the objects of thought, thought would be impossible. In this way the argument for innate ideas is intimately linked to the argument for the immortality of the soul. Without the doctrine of innate ideas Descartes cannot validly maintain both that the only essential feature of the soul is thought and that the soul is immortal. Without innate ideas the immaterial soul becomes essentially dependent on embodiment for a supply of ideas through the senses by which thought would be made possible.

Locke has no such problems it would seem. He can square the immortality of the soul with the rejection of innate ideas, and its continuous existence with the apparent lapses in conscious thought. Locke takes the view that thought is not even an essential attribute of the soul, but is merely one of its more important operations.<sup>10</sup> He agrees with Descartes that we know with certainty that something within us is doing the thinking, but disagrees that we can deduce from this that this something must be incorporeal. Locke would not accept the view that an essential attribute of the soul is thought because he rejects the doctrine of innate ideas. The child in the womb has a soul, but this would be contradicted were thought an essential attribute of the soul by the fact that it has had no experiences and hence can have no ideas to have thoughts with. Thus for Locke it must be possible for the soul to exist without having thoughts if the enwombed child is said to have a soul. And it was a commonplace doctrine that the child in the womb received a soul early in its existence, and certainly before birth.

So, on the face of it, and perhaps surprisingly, it seems easier for Locke to support the immortality of the soul than for Descartes. Locke's view does not have to rely in holding to our immortality on establishing the existence of innate ideas, and he

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<sup>7</sup> PWD vol 2 *Objections and Replies* pp. 246-247.

<sup>8</sup> EHU II. i. 21.

<sup>9</sup> PWD vol 2 *Objections and Replies* pp. 246-248.

<sup>10</sup> EHU II. i. 10.

may allow that we have ideas only *a posteriori*. If Descartes were to accept that we have ideas only *a posteriori* he would either have to give up the view that the soul is immortal, or deny that the, or even an, essential attribute of the soul is thought. Locke *may* of course still accept that there are innate ideas, but he does not need to do so. For Descartes the existence of innate ideas is indispensable if he wants to maintain both the immortality of the soul and his view that the only essential attribute of the soul is thought. Descartes needs to demonstrate the possibility of thinking taking place independently (and thus prior) to embodiment if the soul is to be immortal, even if such acts of thinking are forgotten; and this possibility requires us to have ideas innately; that is ideas independently of sensory experience which would require embodiment.

Locke allows the possibility of a material soul, or at least a thinking substance whose essence is not thought. This makes it possible for the soul to exist prior to and independently of sensory experience. Locke may thus confidently reject the doctrine of innate ideas while retaining the immortality of the soul. Conversely, Locke is keen to reject an essentially incorporeal (unembodied) soul because he thinks that this, along with the maintenance of immortality, would contradict his rejection of innate ideas.

The issue posed here, one might note, does not rely on taking a view about problematic matters common to Locke and Descartes, such as that the mind is transparent, that the notion of an unthought thought is a contradiction so that if an idea were in the mind we would necessarily be aware of it. For the question raised here concerns the dependence or otherwise of the existence of mind or soul on thought, whether this thought be conscious or unconscious.

A possible reply of Descartes might be to suggest that in talking of the essential feature of the soul being thought he is referring to mental *substance*, and this is not the same as merely having thoughts, which are mere modes of the attribute of thought. The suggestion is that the relation between an attribute and its modes is a genuinely asymmetrical one, unlike the relation between substance and attribute.<sup>11</sup> While there is a sense in which this is true, this does not allow Descartes to avoid his dependence on innate ideas, for the asymmetry only amounts to the distinction between the determinate and the determinable. In talking of a substance we are necessarily talking of a determinate attribute; but in talking of an attribute we are committed only to talking of a disjunction of modes. In talking of the substance mind we are necessarily talking of its only essential attribute thought; but in talking of the attribute thought, we are not committed to specifying particular thoughts, but just some thoughts or other.<sup>12</sup> This however does not help Descartes escape his enormous reliance on innate ideas; for although it does not matter what idea is involved in a thought, without some idea or other thought is impossible. So the apparent independence of mental substance from ideas is really only one of indeterminacy of content, not an independence from all ideas whatsoever. So the same issue arises for the Cartesian dualist: there would be no ideas without embodiment and hence no soul except in the case that there are innate ideas.

Of course it will be simply said that Descartes does not have a problem because he does believe in innate ideas and hence may hang on to the immortality of the mind as only an essentially thinking thing, a thing that is independent of embodiment and the source of ideas that embodiment may supply. This is of course

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<sup>11</sup> See Bernard Williams, *Descartes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> PWD vol 1, *Principles of Philosophy*, p. 193.

true. But what I think is surprising is the weight that is placed on the positive view that there are innate ideas not only, as one might suppose, for a sense-independent physics, but for the doctrine of immortality as well. I claim this result is surprising because it may too easily be said that Cartesian dualism obviously aids the cause of immortality - for example survival following death - if nothing else. However because of the dependence on the doctrine of immortality on that of innate ideas it is vulnerable to the charge of threatening immortality to the extent that the existence of innate ideas is doubtful and capable of denial. And we know that it may be both. From Locke's point of view the existence of innate ideas is not only doubtful but demonstrably false. Locke, and those who share his view, might well see Descartes as the one threatening the immortality of the soul. It should perhaps worry the pious more than the mere Lockean possibility of the physicality of the soul.

It seems then to be Locke that turns out to be the hero of the day for those who advocate the immortality of the soul. For his concept of the mind's immortality relies on less - in particular it does not rely on there being innate ideas - and is therefore less open to scepticism. It is not as if Descartes' position has the compensation of proving the immortality of the soul in some way if only you accept its assumptions. Even if we accept all aspects of Cartesian dualism - in particular the essential immateriality of the soul and the existence of innate ideas - this at most makes immortality merely possible. But then Locke's position too seems to allow that much.

However it is worth considering carefully whether Locke's position is vulnerable too as far as supporting a proponent of immortality is concerned. He may have difficulty with the notion of a disembodied mind, which may well be our surviving state after death, when in this state there is no longer an avenue, because of our lack of embodiment, for the receipt of ideas through sensory experience. Since Locke supposes that thought is not an essential attribute of mind, mind can continue to exist without any thought at all. But quite what this form of existence amounts to, let alone how it can be said to preserve personal identity, is difficult to say; for it would seem to be an immaterial existence that does not have, or need not have, the attribute of thought. This leaves it puzzling as to what essential attribute such an existence does or could have. It presents us with the possibility of evoking some incoherent notion such as 'astral bodies'. The difficult question lying behind this issue is whether the attributes of thought and extension are an exhaustive disjunction of ways of being. Spinoza did not think they were exhaustive, but then could not say anything significant about the other attributes. If they are exhaustive, and there is no reason to suppose Locke thinks they are not, then by a curious turn around in the argument, Locke it seems now is in a worse position than Descartes. Descartes can indeed turn the tables here. If Locke supposes that the soul is immortal, and that this immortality may be, indeed is most probably, in immaterial form, then without innate ideas giving meaning and content to an existence as pure thought, Locke can give no sense to an immaterial immortal existence.

Descartes maintains the immortality of the soul on the presupposition of innate ideas. Locke seems not to require innate ideas - indeed he denies their existence - to maintain the soul's immortality. However, if this immortality through continued consciousness takes an immaterial form - as it seems it must given the finite temporality of the body - Locke would also seem committed to innate ideas. He may also have to admit innate ideas unless he can give sense to a non-material existence that does not include consciousness that is yet recognisable as a case of our personal survival. Locke is committed to our surviving immortally in a state of consciousness, and he also suggests this could be in immaterial form, although he also holds that that

immaterial form does not define what counts as a continuation of the same consciousness. But this raises the question of what that immaterial existence consists in if not in thinking ideas. Once the body goes the source of ideas also goes for Locke, and thus our access to the materials of thought, that which makes thought possible. Locke's talk of 'immaterial spirit'<sup>13</sup> is not enlightening. One suspects further that there may be an analogy in the case of mental substance with the problems that beset Locke's notion of material substance, and indeed his treatment of *substratum* generally.

However, could not memory be brought in to save the day here? After I die could not my thoughts continue to deal with ideas which I absorbed while I was embodied? This initially promising way out for Locke points however to a rather attenuated existence, and a decidedly precarious one if one's memory is poor; an existence hardly suitable for a heavenly afterlife. One imagines a fading existence as the individual tediously turns over in his mind the same ever-fainter ideas remembered from his embodied life, with no fresh ideas coming in. This also fails to deal with the true sense of the immortality of the soul, for it makes the soul's immortal existence in a probably disembodied form dependent on embodiment at some time. At most this gives sense to experiences after death; but it cannot give sense to the immortality of the soul as an entity that might exist totally independently of, and thus prior to, the contingent fact of embodiment. It is certainly odd that the genuine immortality of the soul is depend on the contingency of brief embodiment when it may then alone receive ideas, although even then the situation is far from satisfactory as we have seen.

The earlier argument that Locke is plainly better off than Descartes on the question of immortality now seems questionable. It depended on Locke's giving sense to an incorporeal existence that did not necessarily involve thought and that makes sense of the preservation of personal identity. Not only is the comprehensibility of such an existence dubious, Locke also commits himself to God restoring our consciousness after our embodiment - even if this involves a change in the substance on which that consciousness is based - provided only that our personal identity is preserved. This still presents Locke with difficulties. One should bear in mind that by 'innate ideas' here is meant ideas not derived from experience. His openness as to the nature of the substantial bases involved leaves him with the problem of giving a logically coherent account of what the possible outcome may consist of; in particular the ontology of an immaterial immortal spirit that does not contravene his rejection of innate ideas. For we have seen that the notion of an immaterial soul is hard to make sense of if we deny the existence of innate ideas that are available to characterise it as a Cartesian incorporeal thinking substance. But if that is not what the immaterial substance is that Locke proposes, it's hard to see any intelligible alternative, harder still if personal identity is to be preserved. So, after all, Locke is no better off than Descartes; indeed he may be worse off; either he has an unintelligible notion of immaterial existence, or he is charged with inconsistency both by requiring innate ideas for the immortality he advocates and denying innate ideas in his epistemology, that is, ideas obtainable independently of sensory experience and hence embodied existence. Locke's denial of innate ideas is a fundamental plank in his philosophy, and could hardly be dropped without radically undermining pretty well everything else he says.

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<sup>13</sup> EHU II. xxiii. 15.

There are of course additional problems of the individuation and identity of incorporeal substances<sup>14</sup> that I have not examined here. But these are other matters. One can conclude however by asserting, setting those matters aside, that Descartes is quite safe in his belief in immortality in the form of pure thought provided he holds on to innate ideas, whereas Locke would seem to have great difficulty in giving a coherent account of immortality given his rejection of innate ideas.

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<sup>14</sup> Dealt with most memorably in P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1952)